

The
Lowell
P e a r l

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Literary Society*

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Introduction

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Introduction

At a time when funding for the arts has been cut drastically, the literary society of the University of Lowell is proud to publish the second issue of *The Lowell Pearl*. Although new journals often emerge and then fold because of budget problems, I believe *The Lowell Pearl* will escape that fate.

This belief may seem idealistic; however, I know the first journal was well-received and have every reason to think the second issue will meet with equal success. Many people have been supportive of our efforts. This support and the commitment of the people producing this journal will, I believe, ensure its staying power.

Another indication of *The Lowell Pearl's* growth is the number of submissions we received. The large response kept the editorial staff busy. The authors' names are not known while the staff reviews their manuscripts, and we are pleased that the writers in this issue are both students and established writers. The poems and stories in this issue are of a high caliber, and we look forward to *The Lowell Pearl's* continuing success.

Judith Dickerman

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All submissions must be typed. Please enclose a SASE or University box number. Please do not send originals, as no submissions will be returned.

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Joseph Zaitchik

The Short Unhappy Life of the Boy Who Wouldn't Listen

UGGLE BLUG BLUG UGGLE, he said. Don't you bluggle me, his mother told him. When I talk to you listen when I talk to you. She gave him the back of his hand. Listen when I talk to you listen.

Uggle blug, he muttered.

She pulled his hair. You stop that, she said, when I talk to you stop that.

Bluggle uggle blug! he thought, thinking very hard, clenching fists and teeth and eyes, making a terrible face.

I know what you're thinking, she said, and she gave him the back of her hand. Don't you bluggle me when I'm talking to you don't you bluggle me.

He tried it again, this time very lightly, thinking very quietly, barely touching the thought: Uggle...

She didn't know.

He tried again, looking at her now, facing her, looking her straight in the eye, thinking just a little bit harder, but still calmly, still quietly, still not showing it on his face: Uggle...bluggle...blug...

She made a face, but she didn't know.

Again, just a wee bit stronger, faster: Blug uggle bluggle... She looked at his face and she made a face. But she didn't know. She grabbed his wrist and she pulled him after her down the avenue, talking, talking.

He didn't hear a word. Uggle, he went, uggle blug bluggle uggle blug glubbe...

He was eight when he learned that trick. Look them straight in the eye, never mind what they say, just go bluggle in

your head, not too hard, not too loud, and you won't hear a word they're saying. It was a great discovery.

By the time he was twelve he was an expert. He could do almost anything while he bluggled—give you a great big smile, light a cigarette, nod his head like you're so right, hum a little tune, just about anything. All the time he didn't hear a word, all he heard was bluggling in his head. Even if it was a cop. It was a big advantage. People had to listen to you, but you didn't have to listen to them. Not if you didn't like what they were saying. And nobody could figure out how you did it, what the secret was. And sometimes it just about drove them crazy sometimes.

For example, in school, he could stand right there in front of the hawk-nosed, red-faced principle, and watch those thin blue lips moving as fast as anything—and it was like watching TV when something goes wrong with the sound on the TV. Funny. Once he laughed it was so funny—and that's when he learned something else. Laughing stopped the bluggling, you can't bluggle while you laugh you can't bluggle. A laugh is open, a bluggle is closed. A laugh, a real one, opens the closed. You just can't relax when you bluggle, you got to keep your mind on the bluggles, you relax only a little and pretty soon you're hearing the words and you're listening to what they mean and you get mad as anything. That's another thing: when you get mad, after you get mad, it comes out different. Then it goes groogle yoogle grug groogle yoogle grug it goes, and it's noisy inside, like starting up the car and giving it all that loving gas, and when it starts going like that, groogle yoogle grug groogle yoogle grug, you got to be very careful when it starts going like that. Groogles are very easy to lose. Like the time he laughed, and his head opened up and he lost the bluggles, and he grabbed the groogles and it got so noisy inside he lost the groogles, and he jumped over the principles desk and slugged him in the teeth.

And that was another great discovery: you can groogle with your hands. If you're too tired to bluggle, or if you're nervous and you start sweating like anything, or if you feel like you're getting mixed up, then you just let the groogle start up inside, let it run for a few seconds until it gets nice and hot and noisy, and then you let it out through your hands.

Even your feet sometimes. Feet could groogle. He learned that the day he turned sixteen, and the cop put the handcuffs on him, and the groogling inside was giving him a big headache, and how could he groogle with his hands when the lousy things were bluggled behind his back? So he groogled with his feet he groogled. Beautifully.

By the time he was eighteen he could write a book, he figured he was ready to teach. So one day he was sitting in a room with some other guys, drinking beer and smoking, and he was telling them what was right and what was wrong, and that the fat guy who was the boss did everything wrong, and that don't worry pretty soon he'd be giving orders instead of taking them from the fat guy sleeping in the next room who you just wait and see would soon be sleeping for a long time.

Only the fat guy wasn't sleeping, and also the door was open a crack, and the fat guy came running out without his shoes on, and mad as anything. Listen here you punk—

Bluggle ugle bluggle blug. He didn't hear a word.

The fat guy's face was real funny, like when something goes wrong with the sound on the TV, and the guy on the commercial is waving his arms around like mad and his mouth is going up and down about the deodorant, only you don't hear a word. Real funny, but he didn't laugh though, just kept on bluggling.

It was getting harder though, he couldn't keep that big smile going, the cigarette smoke was getting in his eyes, he couldn't concentrate, the beer was making it hard to concentrate. The bluggles started coming slower, not connected, leaving spaces. Words were coming through.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx another thing
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx big trap
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx last time xxxxxxxxxxxxxx lousy bone
xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

He thought with all his strength, clenched fist and teeth and eyes, put everything he had in it. Bluggle! Ugle! Bluggle!

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx end up at the bottom of the
xxxxxxx

No good. The guy was talking too fast, too loud. He

switched from bluggle to groogle. Groogle yoogle grug groogle yoogle grug...

Fine. Good. The motor inside was hot and noisy, burning plenty of gas. He didn't hear a word. But then the fat guy grabbed him by the lapels and lifted him out of the soft chair and shook every last groogle out of him.

Then his hands went groogle. And when his hands were bluggled he groogled with his feet.

And finally he couldn't even think with his feet. And soon he wasn't where he was before, he was outside somewhere, lying on the ground somewhere, all tied up, and the words he heard were as cold and sharp as the wind. He begged then, pleading his youth, weeping his remorse, communicating his regret.

Please, he said, give me a break, I'll do anything, just give me a break—

Bluggle ugle bluggle, went the fat guy.
Please, he begged, he wept, please listen to me, don't just stand there and bluggle—

Groogle yoogle grug! went the fat guy.
He couldn't stand it. He could hear the fat guy's groogles. He wouldn't listen anymore. Bluggle ugle blug! he screamed.

Groogle yoogle grug! screamed back the fat guy.

Bluggle groogle ugle yoogle grug blug boogle groogle—and suddenly he was lifted high in the air, and thrown; and he was falling, falling, and the wild wind tore the final groogle from his mouth, and he struck the hard, cold wetness, and all around was sound, cold wet sound, and the cold was deafening, the wet too loud to hear. But then, descending, he began to hear, clearer and clearer, more and more familiar, descending with the sound, slowly wet and cold and clear:

Bruggle urgle burble glurg

Glurgle glurb blub

Urgle blug

gurgle

bubble

/glug/

Richard Farrell

129 Starr Avenue

"Jeeesus Chrrriist!"

Oh shit, I must hide. Dad was home. Somebody had read the daily paper before him. I was dead. Dad's day consisted of Mass and Communion, teaching College English, and 129 Starr Ave.

My brother Sean hit the street, he was history at seventeen. "This guy is bizarre," was Sean's famous independent clause. Dad wanted Sean to graduate from Notre Dame, told him, if he did, his life would be a "piece of cake."

"Go Irish," screeched a voice from nowhere inside my brain. Like a bell those rancorous sound waves danced between the unwilling metes and bounds that sheltered my reality.

The Fighting Irish. The Gipper. The Big Lie. I wanted to roar back, to murder that wooden, poisonous, omnipresent voice, Dad, My preordained oppressor. But nothing, nothing, nothing was there.

He did. Graduate that is, poor bastard doesn't have a clue about what to do now. Dad never told him. Son-of-a-bitch up and died.

Cheer, cheer for old Notre Dame,

Wake up the echoes cheering her name...

Mother couldn't hide, like me, she was a prisoner, a dangling modifier. We knew better, never should we use pretentious language, jargons, cliches, or euphemisms.

Forbidden was I to be a child, repeatedly terrorized by sophisticated prose. Stream of consciousness. Simple. If only I could use just subject and verb -- Jesus saves.

The hand restraints had started to cut deep crevasses in

my wrists, especially the left. Shackles seized my ankles, evocative of the luminous bench mark which chained me forevermore to my insidious lang syne.

Judge Grasso's blasphemous glare punctured my eyes, piercing my soul. I knew he could see the synapses glowing green inside the forbidden walls of my suspect mind.

This guy is one low-life, scum-bag, derelict. That's what he was saying about me. Grasso, I know what you're thinking, Dad's image precisely.

There were 666 bricks constituting the wall behind the bailiff, no I'm wrong, skip that, there was actually 777.

"Do you understand the seriousness of the crime which you are charged, Mr. Murphy?" Grasso hated my felony, oblivious to my clandestine torment, my resident ghost.

The district attorney had a permanent scowl, one that forced his eyes nearly together, grimacing forward, fusing with his nose. He was the grim reaper, the angel of darkness.

Dad Dad Dad Why Why Why What the hell did you beat me for and all the love you said you had among the stars beyond the tears during your "run-on" rage since you'd kill for me concerning your pain I caused you behind that mask despite your lies the answer I have you'll never leave me or forsake me and your love is so strong that yes you will kill for me Daddy - subordinate clause compound sentence fragments colons semi-colons similes metaphors prepositional phrases now tell me where do I put the commas?

Ernest, where art thou, evidently opium was not the answer. This surely was the essence of nothing. Nada, nada, at last I was in **A Clean-Well Lighted Place**.

I remember now when we first met, 4 months conceived, huddled in the fetal serenity of mother's womb. Seeing the doctors monitor, a wintry periscope gunning for a hint of life. Exhilarated, I heard your heart running fast with childless joy, just 7 inches long, your skin bright pink, transparent and covered with "fur."

Although you weighed a mere seven ounces, your ears, eyes, nose, and mouth had already genetically accepted their final

appearance. I cried. I cried, longing to hold you Meghan dear.

Funny how we all grow-up in the shadow of mother's womb, the pain, the tears, the utter hell of human despair. Conservative. Just another word for nothing left for nobody. Dad, **Who the Hell is William Loeb?**

They huddled together around his cloak, genuflecting on every move, looking back continuously, whispering my fate, waiting for me to unfold. I got news for these intellectual mammoths, my fate was sealed when I was 10. The picket fence post that Daddy beat over my face screamed my destiny.

Perhaps at the end of these shattered dreams there will be an open door. Imagine, thirty years alive in someone else's dream, absolutely nothing was real. Education. Notre Dame. Irish. Catholic. Status. 129 Starr Ave. Lies. Fronts. Hatred. Kill. Love. Jesus.

Daddy. Daddy. Why did you die? See Dad, still held hostage from the grave. Forever. Daddy. Daddy. Why did you lie?

Jack Kerouac. Neil Cassidy. Where are you when the world really needs you? **On the Road** sounds so fine when you got nothing left to lose.

Maybe we could all get together someday and write a sequel to Billy's, **A Rose for Emily**.

Daddy. Daddy. Wake up Daddy. This is 129 Starr Ave. Daddy, the upper, upper middle class. Daddy this is 129 Starr Ave. Daddy you never told me where to put the period!

Dr Sax save my baby child.

Finally, Grasso's regard tracked me to reality, just as trumpets sound the intimate arrival of demonic dreams. Jarring, this was not fiction. Attention!

Like a religious epiphany the voiceless ominous darkness transformed, illuminating my consciousness. With tunnel vision focused on the creaking, opining, beckoning double doors, they turned. Inwardly approached the messenger of doom, the undertaker's smile still painted on his face. Paralyzed, the courtroom stood deathlike, frozen with prophesy. I could hear their silence. They waited. We waited. I waited.

Blue. Green. Brown. Black. Eyes galore burnt rays of glint
on the almighty bench, loud audible whispers were born. Grasso
detoured, now energized, his mouth quivering, lips curled with
hatred, foaming, the vocal cords had failed, like a mime the speed
of sound derailed.

It is finished. Jesus Christ. Grasso's words beamed alive.

"Mr. Murphy, the charge is now murder. Your daughter
Meghan has died."

"Dad!"

M. Antifonario

lowell

so here i am
again
waiting for coffee
and who knows what else:
it always ends up like
this...

five cups of coffee and
a piece of
apple pie and then
waiting and waiting for
someone
to walk in and ask
what are you writing
poetry, i'd say and she
would talk
to me and i would
talk to her
(cleverly)
and i would call her the
next time...

but i just wait
for a while (alone)
and then leave.
sometimes i wonder
if she comes by
just after
i have left
and asks herself
where all the poets have
gone.

Judith Fatyol

Cycling Motion: Movement

Busy feet
 Shuffling
 Babbling voices
 Movement
 Hurry and rush
 Confusion
 Crowds
 Isolation
 Sun
 Warmth
 Waiting
 Pause
 Firm steps
 Attention
 Pens poised
 Writing
 Busy feet
 Shuffling
 Babbling voices
 Movement
 Hurry and rush
 On and on
 Around and around
 AGAIN

Christopher Hanlon

Beginner's Go-Cart Assembly

He wrote:

The boy was eleven and he watched as his father primed the lawn-mower engine which was now the heart of the go-cart. His father had let him help make it.

"You've got to prime it, Stu," the man said. "Just like it's still on the Toro, right?"

"Right," said Stu. He wanted to drive it.

"Okay," the man said. He didn't speak for a few minutes while he checked the lines and re-lubricated the chain. He just did that! thought Stu as his father re-tightened the lugs on the steering column, which was actually an old saved rod from a differential. The boy put his hands in his pockets and took them out again; he quietly stamped in place.

The man tried not to smile; he remembered the awkwardness of wanting but being too afraid to demand. He thought of the wheels; the socket-wrench felt secure in his hands and so he double-checked the snugness of their lugs. Good. Tight. Safe.

He stopped writing. The truth was, he never got a go-cart; he had had to pay \$1.50 for six laps at the small track one town over when he was growing up. That was fun, though — unless you got a car with a sick engine that couldn't keep up. Why would anyone want to read about a boy and his go-cart?

He looked up from the bed and saw she was screwing a tripod into the base of her camera. He wondered: could she want to photograph this room? He thought the place was a mess; her negatives and bottles of fluids and printing papers were intermingled with his books and records and shitty manuscripts.

This was probably not a room to force upon the unsuspecting students of photography.

"I'm going to take a few of you," she said.

Even worse, he thought. His hair was too long, the bed was a mess and so was his story.

The thing was, he felt his story had four main problems. These were: (1) the outcome was predictable; (2) the premise and theme of the story were trite; (3) the story was rhythmically deficient, and (4) its sentences lacked any subtlety; he had no light touch with modifiers and metaphors. Of these problems, (3) and (4) concerned him the most; (1) was intrinsic of (2), which he thought would change as he grew older and became a more interesting man. But he felt his style was clumsy and heavy-handed at times. In the interest of growth, he continued:

The man had always wanted to help his boy with all of his problems, but the go-cart had reminded him that so much of his son's life passed while they were not together. Once Stu had come home with a raised, sticky welt on his cheek about the size of an onion. There was grainy sand in it and the man had asked, "Who did you fight, Stu?"

The boy had said simply, "It happened at school."

In other words, how could he possibly understand if he had not even been there to protect him?

He could smell gasoline making the air thick and he thought that the cart was probably ready, even though they had not started it yet. He figured he would leave the tires semi-soft so they would grip better. They had built the cart low, with wide axles so that it would never flip as it was flung into the corners, which intrepid Stu would maneuver. He had decided against a seat-belt, but he insisted on Stu wearing an orange, sparkling helmet that had sat unworn by anyone for years. There would be rules: prime the engine and wear your helmet.

He stopped and thought: is my life safe? He watched her put her lenses into their cases and thought of how he had overtaken her before. There had been much in her life that was unraveled and out in the open; her misery had been his insecurity. He could always convince himself that his instincts were correct, so he told himself that if he could take her away from everything,

it would be alright. He really did love himself, all his life, and he thought that if that was possible then someone as beautiful and perfect as her could learn to see *herself* the way he did. But some things were so big, he thought. Some things were so rooted and huge that even *he* needed help to win.

Is there even a part in a differential that could be used to steer a go-cart? he wondered. Sometimes he was painfully conscious of his habit of getting into his crusades half-assed. He had thought of having a baby; he wanted one, and he thought a baby would bring them closer together. All of his ideal thoughts concerned their children — they would make everything perfect.

Because even though he wrote about fathers who wound themselves into knots while dutifully placing their kids on the rocket-sleds of their choice, and even though he was able to muster a somber tone for these stories, the truth was it sounded wonderful to him! To have a clear purpose, shared: rear the children. What else could give life more meaning? What else could so blithely erase the shit he and she were engorged in now? Yes, rear the children and teach them to rear go-carts, or beauty, or vegetable gardens if they wanted.

There was a word he taught to his students of early American Literature: "ineffable." Ineffable meant that God was so wonderful and so omnipresent that He was indescribable; He was ineffable. He had no god; nothing was important enough to supersede himself until he had met her, so he assumed she was his religion. And the pain he connected with the idea of losing her was not logical — he had done just fine before he met her, after all — so he called that pain ineffable.

And the lawn-mower engine revved rather high for an idle, he thought; they had built themselves a monster!

"She sounds ready!" he hollered to his son, over the pitch of the strangely loud cart that demanded to be driven.

"She sounds fast!" the boy screamed back. He could no longer contain his excitement.

The man allowed himself to get picked up in the excitement; it had, after all, been almost two weeks. "Sounds like we built some balls into her!" he hollered. The boy started to giggle and stamp from side to

side.

And then the boy got into the cart.

No, he thought. In real life, nothing is so obvious.

At first, he thought that the engine wouldn't start. He yanked the ripcord as he had done before, out on the lawn, but the motor only burped at him. Stu stood still the whole time, hoping his father would not give up. He didn't; on the fourteenth pull, the engine turned over. On the sixteenth, it started.

He wondered about how he should describe the man when the cart spins into a tree, or suddenly accelerates over a cliff, or is crushed in a stampede of passing antelope. Certainly the man would cry, but would that do any good? Would he scream at all?

Four pages later he wrote, among many other words:

screaming

She was asleep in the bed with him. There were no screams, just near-darkness and the repeating grunt of a car trying to start outside and below. He rubbed her neck and she woke up.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi."

She said, "Do you know how much I love you?" He thought he did.

"Yes," he said.

"Let's go to sleep."

Good idea, he thought. Let's go to sleep separately. There was a breeze making their cotton curtains float inward, and the whole building creaked. The moonlight lit the bed.

Joe McGuirk

Vocations

...Popcorn!

Tommy Ketzer's head jerked up and his eyes tore open as he struggled out of a pre-sleep daze.

It was like when you're falling asleep and the next thing you see is this baseball whizzing straight for your skull and then it shocks you awake and it was only a dream because you're not at a ballgame but only in your bed, but even though you were practically snoring, you're AWAKE now, staring at the Wacky Package stickers you plastered all over the bottom of your brother's bunkbed, which is only a foot away from your face (and Ma nearly killed you for ruining the bed) and there is no way you're falling asleep for a long time, but there's that baseball screaming straight for your skull and you yell "No! Dad!"

Tommy's head, which had fallen forward again, pulled up. Popcorn? Why did he smell popcorn?

It was his hair. When his head dipped forward, his curly hair must have come too close to the flame of the candle. His hair was not on fire, just singeing a little.

Father Cleary finished the prayer at the ninth station, "Christ falls for a third time." Tommy hoped no one had noticed his hair. He was the newest, as well as the youngest, altar server at Saint Stephen's, and the other altar boys needed no more fodder with which to poke fun at him.

Like last Sunday. He was supposed to light all the candles before mass. Here he was on the altar in front of 350 people and Tom had never lit a match before. He wasted a few matches trying to get a spark, then finally lit one. As he held it down to the wick of a candle, the match

burned up and scorched his thumb. He dropped the match and yanked back his hand. As he sucked his already blistering thumb he sensed people in the first pews were snickering at him.

As the procession paused at the last stage, Tom noticed the other altar boys goofing off. He did not know these boys at all. Father Cleary did not bother to introduce them when the three servers gathered in the sacristy before mass. Maybe he thought they knew each other, perhaps he didn't care. It probably wasn't important to God that altar boys know each other to serve at Mass. At least Tom didn't have to memorize names. They were both called John.

Finally Christ is resurrected. Tommy has done no more to humiliate himself but fall asleep and burn his hair. The Mass has ended, and Tom tries to go home in peace. But outside, as Tommy gets on his bike, Andrew Sheehan, an older altar boy calls him.

"Hail, Prometheus! How goes the battle? Have you brought fire to the mortals yet?" Andrew, a very intelligent, intimidating fellow, dubbed Tom Prometheus after the thumb burning incident. Apparently, he saw the hair treatment Tommy administered to himself tonight.

Andrew grabbed Tom's biceps. Tom pulled his arm away.

"Still strong? Then I cannot call you Samson. We must stay alert during the Mass, eh Prometheus? It's disrespectful to the Church Fathers, otherwise." Tommy thought Andrew was weird. But he was one of the leaders of the altar boys so Tom was always polite.

"I'm sorry. This is my third service this Lent, and I just started to think about other stuff. I'm really sorry."

"Quite all right, my boy. No harm done, except to your coiffure. Just be aware from now on. Now get along. It's nearing dark. Be careful and good night."

"Good night." Tommy almost added "sir", even though Andrew was only a few years older than he.

Andrew's a nut, and they say he is going to be a priest. He talks like the guys from The Hobbit, and acts even stranger than that. It seems like he is ancient, but he's only seventeen. God please don't let me

act so strange when I get older. He acts more like a priest than Father Jack. Father Jack has a motorcycle, and he's in the army, and he swears sometimes. I would be that kind of priest, if I had a vocation.

Vocation. As Tommy raced home on his bike he thought about that word. "It is never too early to pray for discernment of our vocations." Sister Stephen's closing remarks of CCD class came back to Tommy as he glided past the Post Office. "My dream is to see one of mine enter the religious life." His grandmother said this at the Fat Tuesday feast, and although she was directing it towards Tom's oldest cousins Paul and Susan, Tommy felt a familiar shiver in his spine that chilled him whenever talk of the priesthood was a topic.

"Dinner's on the table, boy," his father called from the living room, as Tommy came into the kitchen. "Better get to it, or it'll be cold."

Tommy's father did not like his son's religious bent. Better a cop than a priest, Mr. Ketzer often thought. Matthew Ketzer's mother always pushed him towards the priesthood and now she was doing it to her grandchildren. Ketzer remembered that Father Somebody or Father This or Father That were always around when he was a kid. Or at least until times got tight, and free meals were no longer available to the good fathers. He had realized young that priests might be able to give you the spiritual food you needed, but that stuff is tough to eat when your stomach needed the more earthly food. He hoped his son would not have to learn the way he did.

* * * *

Baseball season collided with Easter. Tommy was torn between desires. The sport he loved was played every daylight moment Saturdays and Sundays, which, of course, conflicted with the Mass schedules at St. Stephen's. Of course, Mass was only an hour a week (maybe two if there was a wedding or funeral), but he might not get on a team if he missed the noontime gathering that divided the boys up onto teams. Days he had the 11:30 Mass, the best he could hope for was a bench spot, and a few innings at

the tail end of games. But Tommy tried to keep things in perspective. He considered missing baseball as a sacrifice, perhaps not as great a sacrifice as St. Stephen's, but Tommy hoped that God saw the parallels.

St. Stephen was killed for believing in Jesus. Sometimes you want to show God that kind of devotion. Missing some ballgames was hardly worthy of the word suffering, but what else can you do? It was easier when nobody liked Christians, but now practically everybody was a Christian, so there was not a lot of missionary work for an eleven year old. To be an apostle, or a Christian knight, that would be cool. You could have a sword, like Peter in "Jesus Christ Superstar," but I wouldn't deny God like Peter did. What did Father Bill call the Jesuits? Soldiers of the Pope? That would be the best.

Father Bill was a Jesuit priest who the Ketzers knew. Tom's father had been the first baby Father Bill had ever baptized, and although Matt Ketzer was not a fan of priests, "Willie" was "good people." Father Bill was older now, but very wise. He would come to Tom's house, dole out sage advice, bless the children, and whip Matt Ketzer at cribbage. Tommy held him in almost heretical esteem.

The Red Sox were having a terrific first half. Frankie Eretico, Tommy's best friend and next door neighbor, and Tommy would take the radio down to the park Saturdays and listen to the Sox while they played in a sandlot game. If not enough kids showed up or the day was too hot for real physical exertion, Tommy would pretend he was Luis Tiant or Bill Lee while Frankie was Carlton Fisk. And as Tommy pitched he dreamed of winning it all. Nights, the two boys would play with their toy soldiers and tanks while listening in hopes that Yaz would catch hold of a fastball. Frankie loved Rico Petrocelli, Tommy's favorite was Carl Yastremzski, and the two boys would argue the merits of both while the evening sweated on to night. The Sox were winning and as the boys slept they dreamed of pennants.

Tommy hoped this was the year that he and his father would go to the Series.

"Tommy, I got three dreams. One: I want to own a Caddy.

Two: I want to see the land of our fathers [that would be Ireland; even though Matthew Ketzer's father was German Irish, Tommy's father considered himself Irish and nothing else. And three: I want you and me to sit down on the first base side and watch the Red Sox lose a World Series game."

Tommy always questioned his father why he wanted to see them lose.

"Son, we gotta be realistic about our dreams."

But this year Boston looked good. Maybe Tommy and his father could watch them win. They weren't going to Ireland now that Dad was laid off, and working as a gas pump jockey to help make ends meet.

At night, Tommy heard his parents fight about money.

"Local 572 has always put food on this table. Goddamit, woman! I am not going to work for no scabs. Local 572 will come through, they always do!" His father's voice rang off the kitchen walls and into the bedroom of the boys.

"Matt, they don't care about you. They got their dues and now they're hanging you out to dry. Bob Burton isn't Jesus Christ, he's a goddam mobster, and he only helps people when it helps him. Matt, open your eyes." Tommy's mother worked as a waitress at a fancy country club and made good money, but not enough to support a family of four. She had never liked many of Ketzer's union buddies. They seemed like crows to her, always around when there was something to feed off of, but as soon as there was nothing else to take, they flew off to some better spot to scavenge, filling that victim with the same empty promises Matt was choking on.

They fought a lot now. If it wasn't money, it was his drinking, or her reckless spending, or just fighting. The parochial high school fight was another big one now. The test went well, but there was no money for it. God, I don't want to go all that bad.

But he did want to go. The school was really good. Tommy would read more about Prometheus and study Latin, and the baseball team was number one in the state last year. And there he might learn more about vocation.

* * * *

"The Mass has ended. Go then, to love and serve the Lord."

"Thanks be to God."

This was the best part of the Mass (except, of course, the Eucharist, that was everybody's favorite part). Not because it was the end but because the sentiment was special. People, if they're paying attention, promise to do good acts for God, thanking Him, like it's a privilege to love and serve the Lord. That smacked of vocation. To love and serve the Lord. Am I supposed to be a priest? Father Jack says every Catholic boy wonders about it. But I bet they don't wonder as much as I do.

Tommy had memorized the Mass. He knew each prayer, even the long ones that Father Cleary and Father Leone skipped because the heat made lengthy Masses unbearable. Once, to add to Tom's list of altar errors that Andrew was keeping for him, Father Cleary raised Chalice and Host to heaven.

"Through Him, with Him, and in Him." A clear voice carried this prayer to the very last pews of St. Stephen's, however, the voice was all too youthful to belong to a middle aged priest. Laughter rippled throughout the congregation. Tommy cringed, trying to force his body to shrink. He could not believe his own stupidity. He had always mentally sang this part of the Mass. But his fervor had betrayed him, and he stole Father Cleary's lines.

"Well, it appears one of my altar boys is hinting for my early retirement. I believe I will have to put down this coup." Father Cleary smiled at Tommy, but still Tommy glowed red in his humiliation.

And, of course, Kristin Hinckley is at Mass today, right in the third row. She was laughing harder than everybody else. She must think I'm an idiot. She, no doubt, is right. I want to roll up like a caterpillar when you poke it with a stick. Please, Saint Anthony, make Mass end soon.

* * * *

The summer was a scorcher, especially in Church. The late morning Masses were starting to thin out as people either went on vacation or went to earlier Masses (or justified staying away by complaining about St. Stephen's' lack of airconditioning. One altar boy fainted during the 11:30. The ballpark also was losing players because of the heat. Frankie and Tommy were often left alone during the midday sun. Sometimes they pretended they were pitching a big game against Baltimore or Oakland. Sometimes they just sat around and talked.

"Frankie, do you ever think of being a priest?"

Frankie looked shocked. "Are you crazy? They can't get married, or buy nice cars or anything. They take vows against it."

"Father Jack rides a Kawasaki motorcycle, and who's gonna marry me. Kristin Hinckley just giggles whenever she sees me. Anyway, married people gotta take vows, too."

"Well, I never think about it. Shit, I'd fail the entrance exam, no question. Once they say 'Francis, do you promise not to think about girls?' I'd get thrown out. You better not think about it. As far as I recall, not many priests play second base for any pro teams. And I'm not gonna play shortstop with anybody else except ole Tommy Gun as my podner. Got it?"

"You can't play baseball forever, Frank."

"You can't do anything forever, even be a priest."

"Once a priest, always a priest," Tommy looked at the infield as he spoke. The grass was burnt, where there was grass. Dust had taken up residence where dirt was supposed to be.

"Jeez, Tom, you're acting spooky. Let's get outta here."

* * * *

The summer was hot, and when Tom and Frank played army in old man Ilardi's sunflowers it felt like they were in an Indonesian jungle. And whenever old man Ilardi caught them it felt like they were marching down that Burma Road. Ilardi was

not the only one with a bad temper. Tom's father was as hot as the steamy days. He was working weird hours at the gas station, and the schedule made him ornerier than Ketzer's usual grumpy self.

When he was mad he'd find a way to let off steam. One night, before Ketzer had left for work Tom went to the bathroom. As usual he brought a book. The family joke was that rather than add an extra room they'd just put shelves in the bathroom. Everybody already called it the library. Tommy left the book in the bathroom. It was almost bedtime and Tom wasn't going to read anymore. If his father saw him carrying a book around after the appointed hour, it might really be lights out. As Tommy settled into sleep he thought of Kristin Hinckley. She finally spoke to him. She said he had a good singing voice. It wasn't much, but she had giggled less than usual. Maybe he could ask her out and they could laugh about the church incident. Frankie and that girl he liked, Nancy, could go with Tommy and Kristin to the movies. Tom and Frank could walk to the theater so no parents would be involved. Tommy began to feel warm, but then he felt a presence. That familiar pit popped into his stomach just before his bedroom light clicked on. His father stood in the doorway, blotches of red anger mottling his face. He was holding Tom's book. Tom knew it. Just like a dog knew when to hide under the porch on days she was supposed to go to the kennel, Tom had known that the book in the bathroom was going to cause trouble.

"How many fuckin' times have I told you not to read in the goddam bathroom?" roared Matt Ketzer.

Tom shivered, even though the night was hot. He tried to hold back the tears that were burning right behind his eyes. He had not expected that. Everyone read in the bathroom. If his father yelled about reading after bedtime, Tom would have understood. Disagreed but understood. Never. His father had never said that.

"Huh?" His father was expecting an answer. But what was Tom supposed to say. *Five times. Dad, you told me five times not to read in the bathroom.* Tom did not know what to do. And the longer his father stood there, the harder it was not to cry. Crying

meant being a sissy, and Ketzers weren't sissies. But it was no good, Tom's father won. Tom's chest disobeyed his heart, and heaved forth a sob. His father got the answer. He hurled the book at his son, and the spine caught Tommy right on the forehead.

The next morning the only sign of the trouble the night before was a cut on Tom's forehead. His father, who was just home from work sat at the kitchen table, smoking a Lucky Strike. Tom slid into a chair with a bowl of cereal.

"Sox won last night," Matt said. This was a link that the Ketzer males had. Baseball united them.

"That means they're in first 'cause Baltimore lost yesterday." Tom started tentatively, but the pennant race excitement cleaned away all hesitation caused by the previous night's turmoil.

But talk ended as the news came on about Nixon. Tom left unnoticed as his father sat next to the radio with his fists clenched, chewing his lower lip.

Father Bill was to say Mass at St. Stephen's in the first part of August. Father Cleary told Tom that Father Bill requested him.

"He must have heard what a fine singer you are." Father Cleary had never forgotten Tom's name since that incident. It had become a connection between the two, and Tom was glad to take the ribbing.

Grandma says that God turns even the worst situations to good. The singing thing is like that. Kristin started talking to me and Father Cleary remembers me.

Tom was excited. He had never served a mass for a friend of the family. Father Bill was great, too. Any priest whose name was the same as Willie McCovey's had to be cool.

But he was nervous, too. He wanted everything to go smoothly. It was the 7:00 A.M. mass on August 11, and the early masses usually had only beachgoers, golfers and old people, but still Tom wanted to impress the man who had welcomed his father in the Catholic faith.

The week approaching that Sunday was bad. Tom's father

was worse than before. Late Thursday afternoon, Frankie and Tom made plans to play army at Frank's. Frank knew about Tom's father and so helped his friend get out of the house any night he could. Tom's mother understood the boys' enthusiasm about getting away from Matt's temper and okayed the sleepover.

As the two boys packed up some of Tom's tanks and soldiers, they heard the screen door slam. Tom's father was home, and upon seeing him it was obvious that he hadn't been working. He reeked of booze and smoke, and the boys watched him sway as they tried a bold escape through the kitchen.

"Where you goin'?" Tom's father slurred.

"Over to Frank's." Tom knew his father could not complain about this. All summer the boys had been shuttling back and forth; and since the parents got along and the houses were close, he felt he was on safe ground.

"You know what's happenin' today?" Tom then realized his father was not so much drunk as he was emotionally distraught. "Our president..." he blurted sarcastically. "Do you boys know you're goin' to play soldier, right?—do you know I was a soldier?" Tom's father was stationed in Europe during the Korean War. "When I was in France, I saw this broad, this woman with callouses, with fuckin' callouses..." Ketter waved his arms, swaying where he stood, trying to convey some message. "She worked in the fields every day for probably 30 years. And now..." He sagged. He wanted desperately for the boys to understand something. "Shit, she had callouses this big." He made a circle with his thumb and fore finger as big as a golf ball. "Hey, I'm just a worker. Fuck, I'm just a gas jockey. Frankie, your pa, he went to college. Me, I'm just a truck driver. I work and work and work. I was a soldier. For you guys. I didn't know it, but it was for you guys. And now... You boys go play. I'm sorry. Tommy, come here. I love you boy." Tears were streaming down his face. "Christ, I'm sorry. Don't worry, boy, I'll take care of you. Just be careful. You gotta be careful."

* * * *

Sunday started as a steamer. Tommy was up early and ready a half hour before mass started. As he rode his bike to church he said a small prayer to St. Anthony, to help him remember everything today.

Father Bill was in the sacristy. He was still in his black suit. As Tommy entered the priest slowly rose from a chair next to a table.

"Morning, Tom." Father Bill looked especially old today. He ran his hand through his thinning white hair. "It's exceedingly warm this morning, yes?"

"Yes. Good morning. My father says hi, and hopes you're coming over today to play cribbage." Tommy went about, gathering everything to prepare for mass.

"Certainly, certainly."

The mass began. There were maybe twenty people there for the opening prayer, slowly the church gathered more worshipers to itself.

Tommy was troubled. Father Bill was moving in slow motion. Tom wanted to kick start him or something so the old priest would get some life.

As they approached the prayers of the faithful, Father Bill slowed down. Tommy was scared. The old man stopped speaking in mid-sentence. He looked around as if just roused from a dream. He turned his head to Tommy craning his neck. Tommy felt the hot breath on his face, smelt the alcohol, the old man's pores seemed like huge craters.

"What did I just say, boy? I seem to have forgotten my place."

* * * *

The summer cooled down, so did the Red Sox. One night Tommy and his father went to a game with a union buddy and his son. Tommy and the boy waited outside the service gate hoping to see some ballplayers before the game.

Tommy saw some older kid pushing through the crowd as Yaz walked towards the gate.

"Yaz! Yaz! Please can I have your autograph?" The leftfielder was about ten feet away from the boy. He looked right at the kid, turned and walked away.

"That's okay. You suck anyway," the fan said as Yaz entered the gate.

Tommy didn't say a word.

Wendy Mnookin

Yosemite

Abby and I walk to the outhouse,
 her boots on the path
 louder than the crash of waterfalls.
 Her pink nylon nightgown
 trails on the ground.
 A lace collar sticks out
 from her sweatshirt.
Star light, star bright, I say,
 almost too low for her to hear,
 She stops,
 claps her hands together.
 Haloed by the circle of my flashlight
 she makes her wish.
 We scuff on,
 under a sky filling with stars.

Wendy Mnookin

First Child Fairytale

Smoke spills out
 of the silver body of the plane,
 the cord between Seth and me lengthening
 and thinning. Sun glancing off metal
 changes threads of smoke to the color of coins,
 and I'm locked in a castle room
 charged with the impossible.
 "Spin straw to gold." To save my life,
 I bargain—my necklace, my ring,
 and then, with nothing left to give,
 I promise my first born son. As filaments of gold
 fade in the sky, I cry, "Rumpelstiltskin!"
 And the wicked dwarf falls to the ground.
 And the plane holds to the air.
 But what if the magic changes
 every hundred years or so?
 What if the dwarf has a new name?

Rod Kessler

Another Immaculate Conception

Say it was near Christmas
 An immaculate conception
 As all our births must be.
 (Wasn't yours?)
 Or should we suppose
 Our moms and dads
 Did the humpty-dumpty dance for us?
 It's inconceivable. The two
 Don't even talk.
 But in nine month's time—
 In less time than it takes
 To wear out a tire—
 I was a ripe peach on the bough,
 Hanging, as dependent as an ornament,
 The red tomato,
 The big enchilada.

Rod Kessler

Memorial

In dying, you've shrunk,
 Like a tire someone let the air
 Out of.
 You lie in the wooden box
 As dry as a kitchen match.
 Those fingers would snap like twigs
 If I dared unbend them.

On this most family
 Of Jewish moments, my stout uncle
 Cigar in hand
 Lurches at the sight of you
 And says O Jesus.
 Your three daughters,
 Decked out from Saks,
 Don't even try to look.

You sold suits and haberdashery
 in Brooklyn, over the Bridge.
 Choice, not chance, brought a man
 To Max's. We grandsons stand around
 In fine black suits. My brother's vest
 Fits like a tee. Your tailors stand proud.
 And I've left the silver stud
 From my ear
 On my dresser top back in Boston.

I raise my camera but the family wants
 The lens cap on. I could take black pictures
 Of your death but you've turned white on us.

They screw down the lid
 Forever on you. Can anyone sing
 Kaddish? God,
 It's moments like these
 That make me glad I'm immortal.

Richard McLaughlin

Gunslingerwoman

in the old days
 except for Annie Oakly
 there wern't many
 Gunslingerwoman

But nowadays
 you've got to be on your guard

Why I remember
 the last shoot-out

I drew first
 fast
 and shot wide

But she was cool
 as a bullet
 though I'd grazed her—
 a flesh wound

she was calm
 looked me right in the eye
 she did

and shot straight
 for the heart—
 spun me right around

just another notch
 in a gunslingerwoman's butt

left me for dead
 she did

Dennis Donoghue

Compensating

By right the game should be over. We missed our last four shots. We need one basket to win. The jolt of the playground comes through my sneakers and travels a tight cord past my knees into the big twisted muscle of my lower back. When I move I list to the right like a sinking boat making a desperate run for shore. Sweat soaks my shirt and stings my eyes and drips from my fingertips. I blink a lot.

My best friend Frankie walks the ball up the court, bouncing it waist high and close to his body. He wants the ball in moments like this, when everything is on the line. At times he does stupid things with it. I watch Frankie's eyes narrow at the rim and then I cut around my man and nudge him out of position with my butt. I throw an unsure arm into the air, fingers extended, hand waving. Frankie neglects to pass me the ball. Instead he hunches over it and dribbles straight for the basket. A large body steps in front of him. He sends the ball up anyway and then flies spinning out of bounds yelling Jesus H. Christ. The ball follows the rim in slow, indecisive circles and then rolls off.

"Foul!" Frankie hollers from the ground. Play stops. I help him up. Bits of black stone pepper his kneecaps.

"Look for me down low," I whisper.

"Get open," he replies.

"Open your eyes," I say.

"Fuck you, brother."

"Fuck yourself, too."

We shove each other with wet palms. My hands smell of his sour sweat. Teammates separate us, ask do we remember the game. The other team watches. A few guys shake their heads and mumble impolite suggestions. Frankie curses me with his seething black eyes.

Five years and one knee ago I could dunk a basketball. Frankie still can, I think, but doesn't. He says dunking could trigger a heart attack. He is on pills for high blood pressure except he won't take them because he read you can't get an erection. Life has its priorities.

I possess certain skills and not others. My feathery jump shot is on more than off yet I cannot dribble well left-handed. Frankie broke his right arm when he was twelve so, lucky for him, he had no choice. Both of us are now nearly as slow as molasses. Listen to this conversation after a game last week.

"I'm out of shape," Frankie tells me. "It's like my sneakers are nailed to the ground. My man blew by me every time he had the ball."

"Compensate," I say. "Back off your man a little. Let him come to you. Frankie, these guys have ten to fifteen years on us. This is how it's supposed to happen. Don't worry about it."

"But brother, this fuckin' guy is older than me!"

What could I say? Start skipping rope? Give up donuts? Stick to golf? Bodies change.

The ball comes to me on a bounce. I dribble around a pick to the right baseline. Frankie stands alone at the foul line whistling high and sharp for the ball. I headfake to get my man off the ground but he stays where he is, feet planted like fence posts. So I force up a shot. The ball clangs the rim and the chain net goes shush. The wrong guys rebound my miss and all five of them scramble down the court. We catch them and establish a defense. I windmill my arms. We give orders. No open shot. Get a hand in the shooter's face. Call picks. Rebound. Hold 'em.

Finally they manage an off balance lay-up which kisses the top of the backboard and falls through the net. Shit.

Frankie again walks the ball up the court. Sweat pours from his forehead. With his free hand he flicks it off his brow. Under a day's growth of beard, his skin is a shiny red. Too shiny. I think of Pete Maravich and Hank Gathers and every other young tough guy who crumbled to the court floor without a sound. Frankie brushes the salt from his taco chips at the bar where we drink after games. When Hank Gathers died, I told Frankie I'd park the Skylark beside the court and run the jumper cables off

the battery just in case. He laughed and said don't laugh, brother. I think if I play basketball long enough, I'll see somebody go down. I just hope it's a somebody I don't know, a guy on the other team, and not my best friend.

A player wedges a hand into my sore back and straight-arms me away from the basket. I knock the hand loose and push and shove my way back into position. Everyone pushes and shoves. Guys lean on guys. It's late in the game and no time for fairness. I get a second wind and weave in and out of the stack of bodies. The ball zips around the perimeter. Someone lobs it to me. I hesitate, step to the basket, then flip the ball to a guy wearing knee pads and black canvas high tops. He is our fifth wheel. But he has enough sense to pass the ball to Frankie who instantly leaves the ground and releases his shot. I know by the bend in Frankie's wrist and the position of his fingers that the ball is through the net. I don't even look.

"Count it," Frankie says as he turns up court.

Our one point lead means nothing unless we have the ball back. My shirt is plastered to my skin and more sweat darkens the elastic waistband of my shorts. I leave my man and shade over to the man with the ball who has it over his head snapping fake passes but no one on his team executes more than a half-baked shuffle toward the basket. My chest heaves pulling in the thick evening air. The man with the ball groans at his teammates to do something imaginative, anything.

Finally he settles for a flat-footed jumper. I pivot for the rebound and feel the savage pinch of blood blisters spreading under my big toes. The ball comes off the back of the rim in a high soft arc and lands in the surprised hands of our motionless teammate in the canvas high tops. I stare at the smooth orange leather and the black seams and wait for the ball to be swatted out of his hands. Frankie appears and exclaims nice rip and tears the ball away. He charges up court, forearm rigid, slapping the ball ahead of him and the ball coming up as if it is attached to a string.

I wheel my lopsided body behind him thinking rebound or tap-in. At half court I trip over a sewer cover I spent the whole game avoiding. The pimpled iron lid is painted lime green for safety purposes, I suppose. I watch the court fly up at me, rough,

hard, unforgiving. I meet it with my hands and knees and it hurts like hell. Blood trickles from ragged, pitted skin. I lose myself in the blood-lined crease of my palm. I look up blurry-eyed at the players under the basket. My ribs are sore and tight, as if they belong in a smaller man. My heart flutters against my chest wall. With hands braced on knees, I suck the heavy air through the small hole of my throat. Heat surrounds me like a wool blanket. Then my skin goes cold and goosebumps ripple my forearms. My heart carries on a mad, selfish thumping. Jesus, I think, this is new.

My mind has me on a hospital gurney inside a cubicle stinking of Lysol. Somewhere under my skin my pulse jumps. I probe for it and give up since I am not wearing a watch anyway. I guess maybe things are slowing down. Players walk off the court and collect loosely around the water fountain. Frankie walks over to me smiling enough to make crow's feet around his eyes. He feigns like a boxer and cuffs my shoulder.

"It went in," he announces with a bob of his head, "while you were trying to figure a way around the sewer cover."

Later we sit in the cab of Frankie's '81 pickup. We stare across the wide expanse of the faded blue hood, past the court and its enormous chain link fence, beyond the rutted baseball diamond to the column of maples on the edge of the park. Purplish clouds bunch over the swaying tree tops. I sense by the change in the air that a thunderstorm is on the way. We sit and wait for it, chatting about the game in diplomatic terms. I tell Frankie that he shot the eyes out of the ball. He says I rebounded well and my shot was there and didn't I feel it, brother?

He roots a joint out of the ashtray. I depress the cigarette lighter and then take a deep lungful of smoke as if I am about to jump off a dock and crash toward the lake bed. I release the smoke finally and watch it crowd the small gap in the window. I forget the game. So does Frankie. He drums the wheel and then launches into his usual sales pitch about the two of us building a log cabin from a kit on a piece of land in the Green Mountains. Consider it brother. Fishing, clean air, no bullshit. His words ring in the cab, then suddenly I am thinking about a million other things.

"What do you think it feels like?" I ask him.

"What feels like?"

"A heart attack."

Frankie glances at me and faces forward to blow his smoke out over the dashboard. He studies the smoke before answering.

"Most people don't know it. They either die or figure it's indigestion."

"So they find out later?"

He shrugs. I examine his profile, the clean line of jaw under the stubble.

They go for tests. Find out how much time they have. Maybe get an operation. Hey, why the fuck do you care? I'm the one with the high blood pressure."

A fat drop of rain lands on the windshield and wiggles down to the wipers. Frankie mentions Xingu, the lost beer of the Amazon, the Brazilian stuff that pours like cough medicine. No chips and salsa this time, he says. The pressure, brother, the silent killer. He massages his chest muscle and stares vacantly out his side window.

More rain rolls toward the wipers. An elderly couple crosses the outfield. They shift their bright windbreakers over their heads to keep out the rain and then proceed to run awkwardly over the brown grass toward a small car across the street. Frankie toots. He is beside himself laughing.

"That's you and me, brother," he shouts. "Two old fuckers afraid of a few rain drops."

The cab is hot and sticky and has no air conditioning. I imagine being outside with my head back and my tongue catching the cold drops. The air smells like fresh laundry and the raindrops kick up tiny puffs of dust in the infield. I adjust my posture on the seat cushion to find a more comfortable position for my back. My breath is back to normal. I can scarcely feel my heart beat and my temples are warm with health.

In the humidity of the cab, new sweat beads on Frankie's forehead. His skin has returned to its normal tone of coffee ice cream. A crooked smile sits on his lips as if he is on the verge of a startling revelation. "So?" I say. He says nothing though. Instead he turns the set of keys on the steering column. The truck

shudders and falls into a gentle idle. He clicks on the wipers. I track their first clean sweep over the glass as they clear the way for more rain.

Joe Blair

Turning Away

Let me tell you first off that my brother Ralph and I were never close. Even though I spent the first eighteen years of my life with him, and he looked up to me and feared me on account of all the beatings I had to give him in those days, I never got to know him that well. What I DO know, I've learned from letters his wife sent me every now and then. She felt responsible for family cohesion, and in a way I'm glad SOMEONE did.

My brother and I grew up Baptist, and I think Ralph inherited something of our father's puritanical bent. You know: "Life is a trial," and all that bullshit. Ralph always worked; raised two kids; got married after his second year playing triple "A" baseball in Illinois; quit the team (even though the coach told him he had a swing reminiscent of the great Bobby Doerr); took a course at Champaign Technical Institute and got a job at Juke's Auto body knocking dents out of fenders. That was in '62 — a year after I busted our father in the nose and stole his wheels. The cops later found the car in Reno, but I wasn't in it. Anyway, I SPLIT and Ralph STAYED. Ralph always seemed to need work, or fatherhood, or husbandhood or something potentially miserable to hold his place, so to speak, to define his position in the world, At least that's the way I see it.

Last Monday I got a call from Shelia (that's Ralph's wife). Sheilia and I had conducted our relationship strictly via the U.S. postal service and, oddly enough, it was the first time I had ever heard her voice. "May I speak to Jack Varnett please?" I was surprised by the depth and rough texture of it.

"What a wonderful surprise to actually be TALKING to you, Shelia," I said. "What happened? Your pen run out of ink?"

Ralph had died the night before.

"He was talking about you yesterday," she said. "Saying how

he and I had to pack up and move out to Massachusetts. Had some idea he wanted to start some kind of business together with you. 'Start again in the east,' he said. Wanted to know why you never came back home when your father died."

The more I remained silent, the more she said.

He's been sick for a few months now," she continued, "but we never thought...never thought...Oh, Jack."

Lucinda's behind the wheel. Lucinda is the woman I've been living with for the past two years. She's a house master at Westford Academy. I had been working for a heating company out of Ayer (Robbins HVAC) and met her while taking a service call on the school boiler, an old oil burner which ran out on #4 oil. Very complicated system.

It took me about a hundred and twenty miles, from Boston to Hartford, before I allowed myself, as the passenger, to stop worrying about Lucinda's driving and look out the side window at the flitting smoke stacks, then billboards that sported orange circles and 76s, Motel 6s, Super 8s, then, slowly, bare trees, gray and red and a few bright yellow, gathering hills, Playschool barns bordered by round-capped silos, some slitted at the top clinching their uncouth resemblance to perfectly formed phalluses of the earth, then giant power line supports, single file Siamese twins, broad shouldered, short armed, carefully clenching three phase cables that sweep down and rise, sweep and rise over the farthest rise of unshaven land.

An hour into Pennsylvania I'm no longer seated in the black Lincoln; the woman at the controls is no longer fiddling with the radio dial. I'm alone. The country opens up and breathes beneath curvaceous hills more deeply, more softly than any woman I have known. New memories approach and overtake me, memories of hopes, adolescent possibilities. I wander beyond the sound of route 84, between the sundried woods and fields where the future might have taken me, where I might have applied for a job repairing farm equipment that I hadn't the slightest idea of how to fix. I inspect ramshackled barns and farm houses where the windows have long been broken, and a thick musty smell hangs about the front porch and entrance way. I'm not surprised when

Ralph joins me. We walk slowly together, ploddingly, dodging low jutting branches, stepping over dried loaves of cow dung. We reach a clearing and throw ourselves on a golden tussock of crab grass which, in early spring, always looks inviting. It's the kind of day when, if I were a cat, I would slink through the crooked door of one of these shacks and find a sunny corner and spread my belly along the wide pine floorboards, close my eyes and imagine myself a kitten again, sneaking along the bottom of an ever swaying, ever fluttering world and pouncing on moles.

"Why, Jack?" Ralph turns on his side to get a better look at me. The seat of my pants is getting soaked. "Why did you never come home, never call me? That summer — I was eighteen— when you stole Dad's car. Why didn't you take me with you? You know I could never stand the sight of Dad any more than you could. His drinkin', the way he beat mom, finally drove her to kill herself like she did. It wasn't her life she was taking, it was his life too, and mine. It was mine, Jack. And why was it me that stayed. And what about that stuff you used to say about you and me getting the hell out and running with the world? Remember you used to say that? Running with the world."

You know the funny thing is I don't remember saying that, and I don't know why I went to Nevada, or California, Massachusetts, and I don't know why I never came to Illinois. I push myself to my feet and brush my butt. "God, Ralph, you know, you look at me like that, but I didn't STRAND you. I didn't LEAVE Atwood. The car ran out of gas and I found myself in Reno. I wasn't LEAVING anywhere, I wasn't GOING anywhere, I was just in Reno. All I wanted was to get away from everyone that kept pulling at me; sucking the life out of me like a bunch of spiders on a little fly. Everyone has the right to be alone, don't they? That's all I wanted. Separation. And how 'bout you Ralph? Where were you at the time? Were you tied up in Dad's basement? No, no. Seems to me you were playing baseball. Seems to me like you could of cut loose from the web at any time. Any time.

"Christ, Jack, I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. I'm just asking you why—"

"I TOLD you. I didn't SIGN UP for the WORLD. The world ain't my baby. I don't hold myself responsible for any shape your

life might have taken. Yeah, you're my brother, but you didn't see me stiff-arming you into quitting ball, or getting married."

"Hey, calm down. You must be talking to yourself, because it sure doesn't seem like your talking to me. I'm not ACCUSING you of anything, I just wanted to see it from your side. I mean, how 'bout me? A phone works two ways, you know. I didn't call YOU either. Ever wonder why? Or were you too busy not wondering why you didn't call ME?"

"I don't know. Why don't you be a swell guy and tell me why you didn't call."

"When you left, I was worried about where you were and all that, so I tracked you down. You were living in a dive off Lodi St., right?"

"Yeah, How'd you—"

"Well, 'cause Lou Parks from school told me you were living there. He said he ran into you at some joint on 6th St. Anyway, I drove out there and hung around your place for awhile. You never showed up, so I passed some time in a place called Sady's, a small bar with chain link on the windows. Fine establishment. So, I sat at the bar and started to drink. I was into my fourth beer; it was the seventh inning stretch— Red Sox and Yankees— and I twisted around on my stool to check the time when I saw this character sitting at a corner table looking at me. He just stared at me with these mossey lookin' eyes and he stared and never blinked. Never smiled, or acted like he was looking at anything at all. Just stared at me. At first I thought it was you, then I thought, 'naw, no way that's Jack. Jack'd be over here filling up this empty stool beside me. That ain't really Jack. Jack'd be up here talking about cars and baseball, and telling me all about Reno. But somethin' told me all along it was you. Your BODY anyway. So I drove back home. Never told anyone I saw you. Figured you were into drugs, or booze, or you just plain didn't want to see me. I know I should have said something to you, or smacked you in the head or something, but I was so shook up looking at you that way, I just had to leave. Figured I'd wait till you called to catch up on things, but of course you never called, and I never did either, and now I'm dead, and you're driving thousands of miles to look at a body that doesn't BELONG to ME

anymore. Ain't really ME. Go figure."

The car slows and swerves to the right. Low on gas, and Lucinda is tired of driving while her significant other gazes out the window like a large farm animal. But hey, I don't intrude on HER daydreams and she doesn't intrude on MINE. That's the deal.

We fill up the tank and I take the wheel. On the road. Lucinda opens a book and a comfortable aloneness settles over me again. Gas signs, lifted high above stations, sink; the road gets smaller backward through the rear view and forward through the windshield. Collapsing rows of corn flick by and I continue to be alone, to drive the only black Lincoln, to drink the only cup of coffee, to keep going, keep returning to where I came from, to where the road narrows and pricks the horizon.

Midwestern farm houses squat far apart, one from the next, and the vastness and quiet of the land precludes any thought a boy might have of progress.

As a child in Illinois, I often walked the three miles to Uncle Bill's farm. I would climb up to his hay loft, grab ahold of the big anchor rope, charge out swinging and kicking into the empty spaces of the barn, and let go at just the right moment so everything would fall in slow motion until I hit the loose hay. From the loft I could see my father's farm with its outbuildings and corrals. And the thing was, it looked exactly like Uncle Bill's farm looked from OUR hay loft, like I had walked three miles for nothing.

Paula Haines

Empathy

Walking many times past
haunting houses and
firefly hills

Sitting in a car through
summer storms and
highway miles

Hearing deeper echoes
of a long lost
unalone

Suzanne Owens

Preparing to Play in The Snow

1

To play in the snow
 after dinner in the dark. Oh!
 How we tie down our eagerness,
 my sister and I
 with kerchiefs,
 knot our excitement tight
 under chins, hoping
 our luck won't run out.
 Scarves like snowbirds feather our
 necks, fold, cross in ceremony.
 Ends flick on shoulders giving
 us wings.
 We try hard to harness our boots
 already jangling, jogging and hoofing
 to go, zip up jackets like secrets,
 button down mouths.
 We switch looks.
 And only the dark hall sees
 the signals that
 our eyes pass.

2

Finally gathered and squeezed
 we roll out the door,
 pack our good-bys into snow,
 stomp them

down with our boots, softly
 sing, bad-bye, bad-bye. We
 squeak the snow and suck icicles.

3

We will take ourselves dressed, hidden
 underneath all these clothes
 to a field, and there we will lie in the snow
 and make angels of ourselves
 by flying our arms up and down,
 our legs in and out;
 then the angels will let
 our warm parts creep out
 of mittens, pockets, earmuffs, button holes.
 We will make plans for Sunday, as easily
 as the toy store opens in the morning,
 about how we will convince "that woman"
 to leave Father alone so that
 he will stop living at the Selby Hotel
 and come home.

4

We hope "that woman" isn't pretty
 but we know she will understand. She will
 when we tell her Mother has become strange.
 She doesn't talk anymore, and when she does...
 and we are scared at night
 with the sobbing and wailing
 and clattering of dishes,
 the squeak on the stair
 where we think she is waiting
 with a knife,
 deciding whether
 to kill us or not.

5

At last we run down the road from the house,
stuffed like a cabbage, fat with smells
of loss and grief.

The air cools our faces as we glance once back
at windows brim to the top with lights,
like eyes full of tears
that might flow over,
spill out into the night
and drown us.

Suzanne Owens

Persistence

This darksome hill of trees. What can I do
With it? Buy wood violets, you say, they grow
Anywhere. I plant, delicate as blue
Veins, strands of sky, but from this window

Can't see those flecks by boulder, tree and log:
In one year, they spread throughout the lawn, free
Birds perching on numb twigs, blind rocks, mute fog;
New afterworlds for mite, beetle, bumblebee --

I don't know how those tough violets endure
Uncared for, phantoms after last night's chill
Appearing cavalier in gravel. How sure
am I, that I can grow on this hill.

Unless you clear out weeds and brush from places?
With room, small things can grow in small spaces.

Jim Astbury

Borders

They were three miles past the Massachusetts border, a few hours into their trip. Mike's foot eased up on the gas, as one of the cords that bound the gear to the top of the car had come loose and was tapping on the window, annoyingly out of time with the music on the stereo. Jean stirred. "Are we there?" she asked.

"I just want to tie down that stupid cord," said Mike.

He pulled into the breakdown lane and took care of the loose cord. He wasn't sure if they had everything they needed in the two backpacks on top of the car. Their departure had been sudden. Mike had wanted to travel for some time now and his inability to sleep the night before had helped him think long enough to realize his destination. He called Jean. She had been his closest friend for two years and he had told her before his desire to travel. It was summer. They both were jobless. Jean couldn't see herself not going along.

Mike wondered if the car would get them across the country. Would the roads he had used before still be there? How about some of the more comfortable, uncrowded campsites and clean motels? He also questioned his decision to bring Jean along. She had become like a book he never wanted to put down. He didn't have to share everything with her, but he could. Now they would share a tent, perhaps a motel bed, and this car. It was the deepest commitment he had made to a woman in years.

But he wasn't worried about that. He was more concerned about his original feeling: that this should be a journey completed alone, a time to think, not worry about communicating with someone. They passed a hitchhiker and Mike was reassured he had made the right decision. He said to himself, 'Jean will not get in the way.'

With Jean asleep beside him, and the road ahead straight

and empty, Mike experimented with his seat. He found he liked it tilted back a little more than Jean had it set. This took some pressure off his lower back and relieved some of the hungry feeling in his stomach. He had the vents pointed so that the air conditioning hit first his hands which had a sweaty grip on the wheel, and then his face. He tried to imagine the fake puddles caused by the heat on the road as ice.

The last time Mike had spent time with his brother Nick had been during a road trip to Colorado. Nick had enlisted in the U.S. Air Force months before, and his assignment after basic training was to work at the hospital at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Mike offered to help drive Nick's car out to Colorado then fly back. They did not hurry. Niagara Falls, Minnesota, Montana, all were places they wanted to see. They took the high road. They wanted to skip the middle, avoid the open dryness of the flat South. Pine trees made them feel safe. They also liked the idea of staying close to Canada, so that if they wanted to, they could disappear together.

Nick hadn't really planned to leave the service, but escape intrigued him. Once when he couldn't wait for his next scheduled leave, he arranged a flight home on an Air Force plane. Somewhere over Southern Ohio the plane stopped. Nick was not known to be dead for some time. It was not known he had been on the plane.

"Can we stop for food soon?" It was getting dark, and Jean was restless now that she was awake. Her voice intensified the surrounding comfort of Mike's car seat. He moved his eyes cautiously a few times between the road and Jean. With each look he slid forward in his seat a little more, pressing the back of his head against the headrest. The pull of the seatbelt accentuated the curve of her breast under the white tee shirt. Another glance caught her hair as she lifted her hands through it and it spilled over her shoulders like cream soda. "Sure," he said, "We'll pull over at the next place that looks good."

"Mike, you look beat," Jean said, soothingly, "Why am I letting you do all of the driving?" Mike saw her scrunch her brow. She looked cute. Mike smiled. "I'll drive after dinner," said Jean.

They chose "Bill and Ida's Pit Stop." It had once been

someone's house, really, but the couple had turned it into a restaurant by wrapping it in the facade of a log cabin. The exterior paint was the color of dark chocolate. The shutters and trim on the windows looked like lemon candy. Apparently the disguise had been effective, because the parking lot was full.

Looking through a candle flame, Jean made easy conversation about her job search back home. She said that marine biologists would probably be needed to help find the best location for an offshore exploration rig in Gloucester. She listed many kinds of marine life she had seen in the cold waters off Cape Ann. Mike ate his chicken slowly. His ideas about this trip were changing. He felt like he was cheating his dead brother by not thinking about him the entire time.

Jean looked completely at home behind the wheel of her car. Mike couldn't tell that she had never been on these roads before; she was steady, confident. She asked him what exit she should take.

"Look for one with lodging."

The car slowed and Mike awoke in time to see the exit sign under the passing street lights. It was dark now, and the lime green and orange glow of the lamps above reminded him of late night trips to Ohio at Christmas when he was young. He no longer felt like he was fighting the heat. During the day, with the air conditioning on, he had always felt either too warm or too cold. Now he was neither. He slid himself down in the seat and opened his legs. Jean guided the car into the direction the lodging signs pointed and stopped at a light. She noticed that Mike was awake.

"Did you have a nice nap?"

"How long has it been?"

"Three hours."

They pulled into the driveway of a motel called The Whittier Inn. There was a long row of rooms the color of a red barn. Each had a white door, one window and a yellow light bulb over the door. Tall, straight pines stood all around, forming a soft dark ceiling with their limbs. Mike sat up and looked at Jean. He was starting to feel hot again. The vents weren't blowing as much air now that the car was stopped. He reached out to put his hand

on Jean's knee, but rested it on the gear shift knob instead saying, "Why don't you wait here. I'll go in and get us a room."

He heard the gravel under his feet and crickets, and a few miles away the interstate sounded like the ocean. When he came back with the key in his hand, Jean was untying the gear and putting it in the back of the car. "We got number twenty-three, over there."

There was a smell like blankets that had been sitting in an attic for years. There was a double bed with an olive colored bed spread. Mike sat on it and the mattress gave a little. Jean went to brush her teeth and pee, mumbling about being so tired. Mike took the opportunity to change into some boxer shorts and a white tee shirt for sleeping. Jean came out of the bathroom and said, "Cute shorts." As Mike brushed his teeth he thought, they're just normal boxer shorts with blue pinstripes. He hummed a song he'd heard on the radio, and spit his toothpaste quietly. He aimed his pee over to the edge of the water in the toilet so it wouldn't make a loud splashing sound.

Jean was in bed reading the Bible. Mike walked over to his bag to put his toothbrush and toothpaste away and the brown and gold carpet felt like dry, matted grass under his bare feet. He could see Jean in the large mirror that was on the chest of drawers where the bags were. She was not under any covers. She was wearing white cotton shorts that slid loosely down to her upper thighs because of the way she bent her legs to prop up the Bible. Her white top had a pink pattern of tiny roses on it. Mike couldn't see the roses in the mirror, but he had seen the shirt before because a few times he'd stayed at Jean's house very late and sometimes she had read to him in that same position. He zipped up his bag and walked to the bed and got in. Jean spoke, "Did you bring anything to read?"

"Just this morning's paper."

"Oh, well I'm kind of tired anyways."

"Yeah, I think we both are."

Jean clicked off the light on her side of the bed, and Mike did the same. He wondered what Jean was thinking on this, the first night of their trip and their first night in bed together. In a minute his eyes adjusted and he could see her from the light in the

parking lot that came in through the opening in the gold curtains. She was lying on her back. They had pulled the sheet over themselves and her arms were on top of it. Her eyes were closed but Mike thought she must be awake. She shifted so that her back was facing him and her hair brushed his cheek. He could see the side of her face, and while he could feel a film of sweat on his forehead, he believed hers was soft and dry.

"Jean?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you mind if I moved closer to you?"

"No." Mike planted his feet and moved his body over to the right so that his side was touching Jean's back. Her back was warm. He made a new dent in the cool pillow and stared at the ceiling. Jean's breathing got louder. Mike studied the white squares above. For two hours he looked up, annoyed at how hot it was and how vividly the light outside allowed him to see the ceiling. If he only had his brothers bee-bee gun, he thought, he could take care of that light. He didn't want to wake Jean up, but he wanted to talk to her. There were things he hadn't told anyone about Nick that he wanted to tell her, like all the things he could have done to convince Nick not to join the Air Force. But he also wanted to tell her about the fun he and his brother used to have at the old house, climbing the rocks in the back yard. They were good things, most of them, and this was new.

Jean's small digital alarm clock woke Mike. He put his arm around Jean to shut it off and she opened her eyes. Her shirt sleeve was bunched up, exposing her shoulder. She ran her hand through her hair and then got up. Mike watched her. She stopped to stretch, went into the bathroom and closed the door. Mike clasped his hand behind his head and sank into his pillow smiling.

It was still hot as they stepped outside, but Mike had taken a shower so he could only just begin to feel the sweat that would soon cover his body. They walked down a passage through the middle of the motel that led to the restaurant. The way was paved with white concrete. There were rust stains where the hand rail had corroded into the cement. Mike pushed open the glass door and held it for Jean. They sat at a table near a window and

ordered a waffle breakfast.

"Did you sleep okay?" asked Jean.

The hardwood chair had a series of posts for a back, and Mike tried to find the most comfortable way for them to dig into him. "Yeah, I did. How 'bout you?"

"Yeah, I feel good."

Mike looked at Jean while he ate. He thought about how he felt with his body touching hers. He looked down at the heavily varnished wooden table top. There were some chips in the varnish, perhaps where children had banged their silverware. He focused on a dime-sized piece of exposed wood that was faded and rough like dry twine from being wiped so many times. Then he let his eyes blur, as if looking through the table. He wanted to touch her. A chill began inside his chest and extended through his arms. He broke his downward stare and watched little bumps appear at the base of his arm hairs. He took another bite of his hot waffle and wiped some extra syrup from his lips with a gold cloth napkin. As he put the napkin back in his lap, he extended his left leg so that his foot touched Jean's ankle. He looked at her, and she was taking a drink of her orange juice. She responded to the touch of his foot by hooking the back of his ankle with her heel and pulling so that his shin pressed against hers. She squeezed until Mike felt a little pain in his shin. She held him in this position. Mike," she said, "let's sleep in the tent tonight." Mike smiled and looked into Jean's eyes and said that would be okay.

Jean drove. They were headed west, but Mike was beginning to think they should head north instead. He thought he might like to see something different. He had never been to Canada, and to his knowledge, neither had Jean. Then he felt her hand on his thigh. He tilted his head back on the headrest and put his hand on top of hers. He felt some tightness in his underwear as his penis started to become erect. The air conditioning could not cool his face. Jean said, "Mike, I wanted to kiss you in the restaurant this morning."

Mike looked out the window. He saw a blur of guardrail, tall dry grass and pavement with little pieces of what looked like broken glass on it, shining in the sun. He guessed he had felt like kissing Jean, too, but it was different now that she had suggested

it and he told Jean he'd like her to stop at the next gas station so he could get a drink.

He came away from the vending machine with an orange soda for each of them, and stepped around a patch of stagnant oil that had leaked from some engine. Jean was sitting on the hood of the car which was parked off to the side of the station next to some broken cars that didn't look like they had moved in years. "I think we should go to Canada," he said.

"But what about the Rockies?"

"I really don't feel like going that way anymore."

Mike drove as Jean looked for the nearest highway heading north. He liked the crisp sound of the map unfolding. He thought of what he'd felt when Nick had finally convinced him that he really wanted to join the Air Force. After that their Colorado expedition had become exciting.

Mike and Jean found a campsite near Lake Huron on the Michigan side, following a tip from a gas station manager who told them that was the best place to enter Canada. Mike pulled a flashlight out of his bag and they walked through a tunnel with dark pine walls and a soft floor to their platform.

When Mike woke he stared at the pre-sunrise grey. All along his left side he could feel the warmth of Jean's naked body. The sleeping bag felt like velvet against his chest. The air was cool and he took a breath through his nose, filling his head with the clean, soft scent of Jean's skin. As he gazed up at the tent ceiling the details became clearer and soon he could see the stitches in the seams. He had sealed the seams, just like Nick had told him, to prevent water damage. He smiled at the thought of this, knowing that if it had rained they would have kept dry. He turned his head carefully on the pillow they shared and touched Jean's smooth forehead lightly with his lips, and waited for her to wake.

Judith Dickerman

Disturbing the Dust

When Elenor finally woke up, she went downstairs and poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot Hank had made. He had tried to wake her up earlier, before he left for work. "Aren't you going to get up?" he had asked. "I made some coffee for us." The light came into their bedroom where the shade didn't quite reach the sides; there were no curtains on the window, and she had ignored Hank, rolled over out of the light, and pressed her face into the pillow.

The pillow smelled like Hank. There was that scent of oil from his hair mixed with sweat and a touch of aftershave. It had felt cool on her skin, the smell so good, and she had gone back to sleep hugging the pillow to her.

In the corner of the kitchen by the window, she pulled herself onto the yellow counter, brought her knees to her chest, and balanced the cup on them. Then she took her shirtsleeve between fingers and palm, rubbed the window pane, and looked hard at the outside.

The sky was full of white clouds and a few small patches of blue. Elenor thought how when she was a little girl she would lie in the grass looking up, trying to decide what their shapes reminded her of, and how she had imagined different animals. Sometimes she saw dogs, or cats, but mostly she had imagined stallions. They had galloped in the sky, white manes blowing, and they were wild, like the horses that roamed the plains before they were captured, before they were broken. She had sometimes spent an entire afternoon looking into the sky, dreaming.

Along the side of the road there was sand the street sweepers had missed and Elenor scuffed through the dirt. She meant to jog, or walk briskly for exercise, but somehow she always ended up

taking her time; there was so much to see and she didn't want to miss any of it.

There was conservation land at the far back of the dead end, next to the Taylor's white colonial, and Elenor stopped to look at the overgrown loosestrife. The tall marsh plants with the bright flowers could overpower other plants even kill them, but Elenor was compelled by their brilliance. She looked at the profusion of purple flora and thought how they thrived, taking hold in low wetlands and multiplying. They came from strong seed, survivors.

Elenor fingered some cattails, feeling their suede like softness. Her dad had called them cat-o'-nine tails, but no one knew what she meant when she called them that. She would have to explain it, the way she sometimes had to explain things to Hank.

A spider web hung between two marsh weeds, suspended by translucent threads, and Elenor looked closely as it moved in the breeze, thought how fragile it seemed. She wanted to touch the web but did not want to destroy the intricacies.

She snapped a pod from a plant, stuck her fingernail through the hard outer surface, and peeled back the covering to reveal brown seeds and silken fibers. The milk fluid oozed onto her hand making it sticky. She pulled at the silk threads and blew them into the air. Some stuck to her hand and she rubbed them together until the strands curled up and she could pick them off like pieces of dried glue.

Past the marsh area were more colonials and Elenor walked by their slate paths and fresh painted facades. She heard a goose honking, it sounded like a horn in a cave, deep and distant, and the noise grew as other geese joined in. They flew over her head in a V formation. The Canadian geese spent each summer at the pond behind the marsh and she would hear them until they lifted off in the fall, going South, moving towards the protection of its warmth.

The lilac bushes on the Martins' lawn looked like neatly trimmed hedges. Somedays when Elenor was out on her walks, she would see the men the Martins' hired to do yard work out clipping the bushes. They cut them back, the dark leaves falling onto the ground, to the same height as Elenor's shoulders. She

liked her own lilac bushes better, thought how they bloomed in early May with their heavy sweet scent; they were taller than Elenor, their branches long and free.

A haze covered the sun, but it was still hot, and beads of sweat gathered between her breasts and ran to her stomach. The jersey sundress she had put on stuck to her skin, the material dark with wetness under her arms, so she welcomed the breeze that had kicked up. Someone had been out mowing, she could smell the cut grass, and she took a deep breath.

Each time she walked by the conservation land she noticed the loosestrife, a sea of purple. The underbellies of the clouds were getting dark now, dark and gray, and the blue sky was hidden behind the mass. The breeze gusted, tossed leaves on oaks, and lifted her hair, carrying with it the scent of flowers. The trees were old, large trunked and strong, still the wind flipped the foliage, displaying silvery green, and sending an occasional helpless leaf swirling to the ground.

At home she opened both the front and back doors to create a cross breeze and the curtains in the dining-room fluttered. The sound of dirt clicking up the metal tube pleased her, she knew from that noise that her effort was making a difference, and the loud hum of the machine was soothing as she pulled it behind her. She moved the rocking chair to get at the rug underneath and stopped a moment to feel the knots under her fingertips. She liked the natural texture of wood and how the knots looked like the centers of felled trees with their concentric rings.

She vacuumed the den's braided rug and stopped at a pine cobbler's bench. There was a wicker basket on the bench filled with rose petals the color of fading blush. She had dried the flowers last year, hanging them upside down by the windows in the kitchen. Hank had come in, looked at all of the roses tied to the strings of the venetian blinds, moved his heavy brows down over his eyes until there were lines on his forehead, and left the room, slowly shaking his head. Elenor liked their soft scent, and it had seemed to permeate the house. She picked some petals up and brought them to her nose, but there was only a slight hint of

their old scent; they felt dry and brittle.

Elenor had taken out a feather duster like the one her mother had when she was little. It had a long wooden handle and when she was small she had ridden her mother's like it was a pony, prancing around her parent's house with the feathers sticking out behind her. Her mother would laugh and then ask her to stop, saying she had to get some work done. Elenor touched the feathers, stroking them, thinking. She thought of the work her mother did; you never really got rid the dirt. Dusting was the strangest concept— all you really did was disturb the surface, sending particles into the air until they alighted on the same spot.

She put the duster down, walked into the kitchen, poured a glass of lemonade, and pulled herself onto the counter. The ice cubes clinked, condensation formed quickly on the glass, and when she drank the liquid felt cool on her throat. Elenor chewed on a little piece of skin on her lower lip and wiped the windowpane with the palm of her hand. The roses were at the far back, climbing the chainlink fence.

It didn't take Elenor long to cut enough flowers to fill the crystal vase her grandmother had given her for a birthday present. There were many blossoms, though the leaves were full of holes from the Japanese beetles. She snapped the damaged leaves from the cut flowers and dropped them on the ground. On the bush, the copper-backed beetles were busy munching, but she left them alone.

The roses were in full bloom the summer she and Hank had moved in, growing all over the fence. She had clipped some and brought them to a local green house and the man said they were climbers, the pale pink ones called Ophelia and the other, a deeper shade, named Evensong. He said the more vigorous the climber, the more attention it would need and the stronger its support must be.

The man pushed the baseball hat further back on his large head and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The man said it was hot and Elenor agreed. Then she told the man she didn't know much about gardening and growing. He

gave her information about pruning, proper drainage, when to feed the roses fertilizer, what kind to use, and how to wrap the canes in burlap to protect them when winter came. She didn't know cane was a fancy word for a stem, what mulching meant, and was confused when he told her to make sure she examined the pith for the proper color. There were rows and rows of plants in the nursery, the light was giving her a headache, she was sweating, and her mouth was suddenly dry; Elenor had to get out.

It happened in grocery stores too. Once she left a full carriage of groceries in the dairy section and ran to the door. She tried to go out the door people entered the store through and she felt trapped. The door swung open when someone came in and she bounded outside trying to catch her breath. She had gone home and called Hank at his office. She tried to tell him how the fluorescent lights pulsed in her eyes until they seemed to throb inside her head, how the aisles of food made her dizzy, and how the crowds of people were crushing towards her until she couldn't breathe. "My God, Ellie, stop crying, it's only a grocery store." She didn't know how to explain it so he would understand, but he did the shopping after that.

When the "episodes," as Hank called them, started happening at work, he insisted she see someone. The counselor called them panic attacks and said they weren't uncommon. Hank wanted her to quit working and since they didn't need the income from her part-time secretarial job, she agreed. Gail, the counselor, said if Elenor couldn't work she would need to find something to do for herself, and she suggested Elenor read to relax and take daily walks.

Elenor bought a book on growing roses and when she was finished she knew that the pith of a good live cane should be white, if it wasn't she should prune further, snipping off a little at a time until she located the white center. She also understood the need to clean up debris and old leaves in order to keep disease from spreading, and after pruning the cuts needed to be sealed to protect from borers that would weaken the plant.

Then she had tried her hand at gardening. She bought a good pair of pruning shears, gloves to protect her hands, and she had felt prepared. She had cut off the old non-productive canes of

winter die-back, and had been attentive to the quick removal of spent blooms, but she could not bring herself to use pesticides. Elenor thought the aphids, soft-bodied insects, and the beetles with wings that glinted in the sun were as much a part of the outdoors as the rose, maybe more so.

The insects were there naturally, she thought, the flowers were only hybrids, created by humans. The roses needed constant attention to survive, they weren't like the loosestrife in the marsh, and Elenor decided she couldn't give them what they needed. She had tried to be careful, to clean up dead leaves and debris left from pruning, but there was always more to be done and she couldn't get ahead of it.

She brought the flowers into the house and put them on the counter. There were still some green leaves near the blossoms and she left them on the stems for color. She placed the roses, some pale pink and the others a deeper almost peach shade, into the vase, its crystal etched with leaves. The cuts were delicate and made the vase look frosted as if she had just taken it from the freezer like a beer mug. The neck tapered in a little too much, it was difficult to get the flowers in; there just wasn't enough room.

Elenor tried to make an arrangement, tried re-arranging them, but it was still too tight. After awhile she put the flowers down on the counter and left them there. She couldn't seem to do it right.

The air in the house was heavy and she felt tired. She went to sleep on the couch in the livingroom, pulling a light quilt over her even though it was hot. She always slept with a cover pulled up over her shoulders and under her chin. Her mother had tucked her in that way when she was little, and she still liked how it felt to be tucked in tight.

When she woke from her nap, she was surprised to find it was evening and already dark. Usually in the summer it would stay light until after eight o'clock, but a late thunderstorm was coming. Elenor enjoyed a summer downpour, especially on humid days like today, when steam would rise from pavement with that tar scent, and afterwards it would be cool with the smell lingering in the air.

She took the coffee can out of the refrigerator and counted the

tablespoons of ground beans as she put them into the filter. She lost her place and had to dump the coffee back into its container and start again. She concentrated on the counting, tried not to look out the window at the growing darkness and her damaged rosebush. She didn't want to lose her place this time, didn't want to have to start all over again.

The coffee brewed, dripping slowly into the pot. Hank liked to have coffee when he came home from work and it was late, already after six-thirty; he would be home any minute, turning his red corvette into the driveway. Every Saturday he spent hours washing it. He would soap the car, rinse, and then buff with a soft cloth till it shined.

Elenor told Hank how she felt the car was only a heap of metal, no, make that fiberglass she corrected herself, and that it would break down, fall apart someday. She said he was wasting his time.

"You don't understand," Hank had said. "If I'm real careful and treat it right, this beauty will last forever."

Elenor poured herself a cup of coffee and sat on the counter. She sipped at the coffee, but it was too hot and burned the roof of her mouth. She jumped, suddenly realizing she had forgotten about dinner. There was nothing in the refrigerator she could put together; Hank hadn't gone shopping for awhile, and it was too late to thaw anything from the freezer. There was some macaroni and cheese, a couple cans of soup, and a box of cereal.

They would have to go out to dinner. Elenor thought of a small restaurant they had gone to once, it was quiet and lit with candles. There was a woman in a far corner playing a harp and Hank and Elenor had spoken in hushed tones. The candle's flame had flickered, the light dancing in Hank's eyes, gleaming bright like a school boy's. She smiled and thought it would be fun to go back.

She drained her cup, looked at the clock on the wall, and wondered where Hank was. It was seven and he was usually home by six-thirty. She dialed his number at the office, but only reached the answering machine. She walked around the house, looked out the front door, and then went back into the kitchen.

She got herself a bowl of cereal, puffed rice, sat in her corner, and ate it dry. There was a small amount of milk but she wanted

it for coffee. The kitchen was clean and she didn't want to make a mess cooking something just for herself.

Contributors

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Rod Kessler of Cambridge is completing a year sabbatical leave from Salem State College, using that time to marry, father a child, read most of the fiction of Thomas Hardy, and work on a novel. His book of short stories, *Off in Zimbabwe* was published in 1985. He has new poems coming out in *New Mexico Humanities Review*.

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